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ABSTRACT

An instructor of an advanced composition course (adapted from one taught by James Seitz at the University of Pittsburgh) at the University of California Riverside took her students through a series of reading and writing assignments that asked them to "engage in a wide variety of prose styles and...consider what style suggests about language, subjectivity, and artistic expression." The students worked with several fiction and nonfiction texts, first analyzing their stylistics and then emulating some particular stylistic feature in their own prose. Writing assignments included epistolary writing, shifts between third and first person and the incorporation of two or three different languages and dialects, composing their own "modest proposals," retelling a fairy tale from the point of view of a "misunderstood" character, and taking on the persona of Holden Caulfield. In their introductions to their portfolios, almost every student--8 out of 12 in the class--included an analysis of what had come to be known as the "Holden paper," a 3-to-4-page piece in which they each re-wrote a newspaper article of their choice in Holden Caulfield's voice. One student's "Holden paper" serves as an illustration of the work. As the instructor looks back at last Winter's class, she is encouraged by the fact that racial, gender, and age differences from Holden's white male adolescence did not seem to be an issue for her student writers. Mostly, the students took on Holden's voice with enthusiasm and confidence, even though they came into class wanting to stick to the known path of academic rules. (NKA)

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The Irony and the Ecstasy: How Holden Caulfield Helped My Advanced Composition Students Find Their Voices.

by Linda Huff

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The Irony and the Ecstasy:
How Holden Caulfield Helped My Advanced Composition Students Find Their Voices

Presented by: Linda Huff
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My decision to write this paper came from observations that Ronald, one of my Advanced Composition students, made in his written Introduction to his final portfolio last Winter—that, "By the end [of English 103] it is apparent that not only have I learned about other's voices, but I have also learned something about my own voice as well.... What happened as I studied and wrote in other styles was very surprising. I found that my own style was being shaped and formed." [Citlau, "Final Portfolio," 1, 5]. His surprise reflects the fact that he, along with his classmates, came into the class skeptical about what he was going to learn from taking on the various styles of other writers. The students, many of them seniors, half of them English majors and the other half Education majors, signed up for the course expecting traditional guidance toward improving their academic writing. "Traditional" meaning help with composing and then revising expository and argumentative essays, controlling grammatical and mechanical errors, using documentation, etc. They had long since been through the three-part freshman composition series of 1A, 1B, and 1C, and a number of lower and upper division literature courses, and as they approached graduation they wanted help toward mastering their academic writing skills. I had been told by the English department [at UC Riverside] that I could teach the course "any way [I] want[ed]," so I had chosen to adapt an "Advanced Writing: Prose Style" course taught by James Seitz at the University of

Pittsburgh. Both of our versions took students through a series of reading and writing assignments that asked them to, as Seitz phrased it in his syllabus, "engage in a wide variety of prose styles and…consider what style itself suggests about language, subjectivity, and artistic expression" [Seitz, English Composition 1220 Syllabus, 1]. Our students worked with several fiction and non-fiction texts, first analyzing their stylistics, and then emulating some particular stylistic feature in their own prose. The main difference between our two versions was in some of the texts we read and the attendant writing exercises we assigned. My class read texts ranging from Alice Walker's The Color Purple, to Victor Villanueva's Bootstraps, to Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," to Jon Scieszka's "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs," to J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. Writing assignments included epistolary writing (inspired by Walker), shifts between third and first person and the incorporation of two or three different languages and dialects (inspired by Villanueva), composing their own "modest proposals," re-telling a fairy tale from the point of view of a "misunderstood" character, and taking on the persona of Holden Caulfield.

Two students dropped my class after I read the syllabus aloud on the first day, and a couple of others disappeared along the way, all because the course was not what they were used to or expected. Most of them stayed with me, though, because the course is a requirement for those going on to earn a Teaching Certificate. I went into English 103 last Winter unaware of students' requirements and expectations, and as it progressed I became increasingly apprehensive about what they *were* going to get out of the class. It was uncharted territory to me, too. While I had found ways to incorporate one particular element of creative writing into my teaching, with the regular inclusion of at least one

writing assignment that asks students to analyze the point of view of a writer or of a character in a literary text, I had never before used what could be considered an extended creative writing approach to teaching a composition course. In spite of my doubts, I pushed forward with my syllabus because of my longstanding belief that students of composition learn a great deal about their own writing during the process of taking on another writer's perspective, and that it is an important step toward developing a distinct point of view in their own writing. I knew that Seitz's approach would enable us to spend the entire quarter examining point of view in various ways, from the inside out. Of course, that meant I was taking the always-difficult route of stepping into someone else's pedagogical conception of a course, and I wondered just how things would turn out in the end.

In fact, it wasn't *until* the end, while I was reading the students' Introductions to their final portfolios, that I found out what they would get out of the class. In the assignment for the Introduction—the only piece of writing they produced for the course that even remotely resembled "traditional" academic writing—I asked them to, "Write an introductory essay, of at least three pages, that discusses the **style** of two of the Papers you wrote this term.... Think back over your writing process as you answer the following questions: What work did you have to do? What was easy? Difficult? How would you change your approach to each style if you had it to do over again?" These seemingly simple questions prompted students to take their composing methods apart in surprisingly articulate ways. Like the comments from Ronald that inspired this paper. And like another student's--Amy's--observation that, "Through the exploration of different styles I found new ways to express my thoughts, and even myself" [Cochran, 1].

Both of these students, along with others in the class, came to recognize, ironically, that, in the process of taking on the stylistics of other writers, they reached new understanding about their own written voices. We never discussed—either in or outside of class--what might have been happening to *their* voices, so they reached those conclusions all on their own.

In their Introductions, almost every student—eight out of the twelve in the class—included an analysis of what had come to be known as the "Holden paper," a three to four page piece in which they each re-wrote a newspaper article of their choice in Holden Caulfield's voice. The assignment was adapted from one in which Seitz asked his students to convert a newspaper article into the voice of Mr. Stevens, the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. Both of our prompts stated that, "the object is to capture, as closely and precisely as you can, the characteristic sentence patterns, rhythms, nuances, and intonations of the narrator's style" [Seitz, Exercise 4; Huff, Paper 4]. I wasn't familiar with Mr. Stevens, so I needed to come up with an alternative for the assignment, which I was attracted to because of the rich complexities of simultaneously taking on a fictional character's voice and writing in the style of a non-fictional newspaper article. I immediately thought of Holden, because he is one of the most distinctive narrators in 20th century American Literature.

Many of the features of his voice are demonstrated in the opening paragraph of Ronald's Holden paper, which is a re-writing of an article about a community of reformed Christians. [I quote]:

> In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia a group of Christians are living in a commune, which is fine, I guess, if you're into that kind of thing. I'm not.

> but I wouldn't hold it against anybody that did, unless you're these morons. These people moved there trying to escape the coming apocalypse of Y2K, which is pretty funny if you think about it. What moron would move to the mountains for something that ended up not even happening? Maybe my old roommate Ackley, he's kind of stupid that way. You know what I mean, always believing the aliens are coming or some weird crap like that. One time I remember him telling me about how one of his friends got abducted by some goddam aliens. He wouldn't drop the subject, I would have hit him but I'm too yellow for that, I admit it, I just can't bring myself to hit anyone, even old stupid Ackley (Citlau, "They Headed," 1).

Two of the most prominent features are Holden's use of profanity, and his habit of calling people "morons." Even those students in the course who had trouble taking on the voice managed to include a preponderance of curse words and "morons" in their papers. Another quality is that, to Holden, most things are "pretty funny if you think about it," since his way of struggling to maintain his very fragile self-esteem is to disparage and poke fun at just about everyone else around him (except for his family members—especially his little sister, Phoebe). The title of the original newspaper article is, "They Headed for Hills for Y2K, and Stayed." The disparaging title that Ronald gave Holden's version is, "They Headed for Hills for Y2K, Thank God They Stayed." The paragraph also includes another one of Holden's catch phrases--"if you're into that kind of thing"—and incorporates his use of the rhetorical question. In this case, the question is, "What moron would move to the mountains for something that ended up not even happening?," and it gets at the heart of the issue for Holden and, I suspect--knowing Ronald's own

point of view as well as I do--for him, too. Finally, the character's frequent difficulty with staying on the subject is illustrated by the concluding anecdote about his roommate, Ackley. The class came to call these "Holden-like tangents," and in his Introduction Ronald insightfully observe ' that, "The thing about [them] is that they have nothing to do with anything; they just, perhaps, reveal a part of Holden's character to the reader" (Citlau, Introduction, 4). What is revealed in this tangent is the fact that, in spite of all his bravado, he's really a soft touch. After all, as he says, "I just can't bring myself to hit anyone, even old stupid Ackley."

Most of all, though, Holden is a very astute observer, as a passage that appears later in Ronald's piece illustrates. [I quote]:

> Now their leader is quite a piece of work, really he is. His name is Ken Griffith and he looks like a goddam giraffe, I swear to God he does. Have you ever met someone with a really long neck? I always wonder whether people with long necks were stretched when they were young? I was going to ask him about it, but he seemed quite nervous so I didn't think I should ask him at the beginning of his interview. When we sat down and started talking I couldn't get over his mouth. He's missing his two front teeth. No wonder he lives in the mountains; he's a goddam hillbilly. When he talked he couldn't make the "th" sound, he sounded like a moron, to tell you the truth it was funny, but I didn't want to laugh at him, seeing that he was already so nervous (Citlau, 2).

In this passage, Salinger's character notices Griffith's nervousness—a condition that seems to be making the ever-sensitive Holden a little nervous, too. He also takes note of Griffith's long neck and the gap in his teeth, and Ronald captures the laugh-out-loud

humor of Holden's voice in his descriptions of them. Another feature to add to those discernable in Ronald's first paragraph is Holden's frequent insistence that he isn't lying, with his use of the phrases "really he is," and "to tell you the truth," which appear often in Catcher in the Rye. Of course, the irony is that Holden's self-confessed, habitual lying makes him a very unreliable narrator, and Ronald's depiction of his voice cleverly plays with that irony.

In his Introduction, Ronald articulates what he calls the "unique challenge" of taking on a voice that is not his own, saying, in particular, that, "In truth, anytime I take on another person's voice I have to mold it and force it into my own voice. In other words, I try to find that alternate voice within myself and then express it on paper" (Citlau, Introduction, 3). Most intriguing here is his indication of "that alternate voice within [him]self," because it is a realization that he possesses a plurality of voices from which to draw during his writing process. This disrupts the notion of the writer's singular "own voice" that he alludes to in the previous sentence—a voice that, in reality, is elusive for most writers—and it calls attention to a repertoire of vocal possibilities. Right after the Holden paper, he artfully and confidently tapped that repertoire for the Villanueva assignment, which called for vacillation between first and third person voices--creating the convincing persona of a recovering drug addict who was hearing the voice of his psychiatrist in his head.

Ronald was one of the eight students who wrote about the Holden paper in his Introduction, and I would like to draw the conclusion that it was that particular exercise in "role play" which enabled the majority of the English 103 students to learn the most about the workings of their own voices. In Motives for Metaphor, Seitz describes the

"role-play" assignment as one which "asks students to write not as themselves but in the guise of another"--something which he calls the "'metaphorization' of the writer" (9). Role play is not simply imitation, but rather a deliberate construction of fictional personae that he characterizes as, "outside of creative writing classes, ha[ving] held only a marginal place in the English studies curriculum" (9). I would further argue that my students' realizations about their own voices also grew out of their writings *about* their role play. Those writings are the kinds of "metatexts" that Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield describe in Texts and Contexts: self-evaluations of their processes of role play. Seitz identifies one of role play's pedagogical possibilities as providing students with a "useful" analytical distance from their writing. I would agree, and add that the act of writing the metatext gave my students the opportunity to articulate the insights that emerged in the analytical space between them and their writing. Without the metatexts, I would never have *seen* what they learned through role play.

I think that, in my Advanced Composition class, the distance between the students and their writing was created, in part, by the discomfort and disruption of learning to write in a way that broke many of the academic conventions they had become so familiar with. My students came into the class wanting to stick to the known path of academic rules, and in a number of their metatexts they describe their initial unwillingness to stray from it. Amy, for instance, admits that, "This was perhaps one of the most challenging tasks I have been asked academically to complete. After nearly four years of writing papers with a very specific structure and strict guidelines, creating papers outside of this domain was a very thoughtful and challenging process" (Cochran, 1). And Ronald, using a somewhat hackneyed metaphor to describe his initial reluctance to explore language in

new ways, recognizes that, "I had the difficult problem of breaking out of the box that says, 'Everything you write must point to some main point'" (Citlau, "Final Portfolio," 4). Another student, Barbara, pointed out that she broke academic convention in her Holden paper by "employ[ing] non-linear thinking to lead from one point to another" (Crouse, 1).

Analytical distance was also created, I think, by the act of stepping out of themselves and taking on another's voice and, by extension, consciousness. Ironically, the process of taking on another consciousness made the students conscious of *themselves* and *their* writing in new ways. Suzanne articulates this in her metatext, where she writes that "explor[ing] different state[s] of mind" is "beneficial" to writers, because it "let[s] them "discover themselves…at the same time" (Vu, 1). The Holden paper was an exercise in self-discovery for Suzanne, and a few of the other students, who seemed to have become more conscious of those personality traits that they had in common with Salinger's character. In his metatext, Ronald writes that Holden's sarcasm was one thing that made it easy for him to take on his voice, because, "I am also very sarcastic, so I was able to use my sarcasm, which in many ways is close to Holden's sarcasm. I also chose an article that worked very well with sarcasm" (Citlau, Intro, 3). Amy, similarly, admits to being a "sarcastic person by nature," and writes that, "this paper was a perfect way for me to express myself while capturing the persona of Holden" (Cochran, 3). Each of these statements, and the papers to which they refer, demonstrate another one of the pedagogical possibilities of role play that Seitz identifies in Motives for Metaphor—that it enables students, through the process of "projecting their own experiences and values into the role," to "create… [an] honesty about and commitment to [their] words" (Seitz,

Motives, 160). Amy's Holden paper is the best she wrote for the course, illustrating her commitment to the words she wrote for that assignment. Ronald's previously demonstrated devotion to his creation of the persona included a description of the leader of the Christian community as a "hillbilly" that was perhaps a reflection of his own values about people who live in isolated communities in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I found, generally, that each student seemed more invested in those assignments which asked them to take on the style of a writer or persona they identified with, and classroom and office hour discussions about those assignments revealed that it was because those assignments gave them the opportunity to incorporate their own experiences and values. Students are often penalized for projecting their own subjectivities into the objective voice that more traditional academic writing assignments require—a projection that can be difficult to avoid if the writer feels any kind of identification with the subject. One of the most empowering aspects of the role play and other stylistics assignments in English 103 is that they gave students the opportunity to use their subjectivities toward the creation of effective prose.

Generally, last Winter quarter, once my students got over their initial shock, they demonstrated a devotion to their writing, and a willingness to meet the challenge of each new and different assignment, that I don't often see in a required composition course. Their devotion to creating strong, consistent representations of the styles of the various writers and the features of the personae prompted them to read the course texts, *and their classmates' texts*, very closely. I have tried various ways to encourage my students to read that closely in other composition classes I have taught, without the kind of success I had in English 103. That success is demonstrated in the detailed descriptions of the

various features of Holden's voice in the students' metatexts. Like Suzanne's statement that, "he says a lot, but in very few words" (Vu, 3), and Barbara's observation that "an important part of what makes [his] perspective unique are the minute details" (Crouse, 1). That success is also demonstrated in the care with which Ronald, and almost all the other students in the class, incorporated those features into their Holden papers, because that kind of attention to detail could only have resulted from an equally careful attention to detail while reading Catcher in the Rye.

My students were really beginning to understand how to use words effectively, or what Ronald calls the "purposefulness behind writing," and I believe it was because the assignments—and particularly the role play assignment—pushed them to recognize their audience and its expectations. This confirms Seitz's observation, again in Motives, that, "By making the intended audience more explicit than assignments that merely ask students to 'discuss' an issue or 'write in response' to a text… role play assignments supposedly help students to write with a keener sense of context and purpose than they do otherwise" (Seitz, Motives, 162). Regular group presentations made my students' intended audience even more explicit. Every other week, a group of three students was expected to lead the class in a discussion about papers that were written by three of their classmates. Some groups pulled this off better than others, of course, but the point was that over the course of the quarter every writer in the class got to know their audience. That knowledge, along with the consciousness prompted by the Holden paper assignment's request that the students "capture [his style] as closely and precisely as [they] can" (Huff, Paper 2 Assignment), encouraged them to meet the "challenge" of, in

Ronald's words, "captur[ing] his voice and keep[ing] it through the whole story" (Citlau, Introduction, 3).

My original intention for this paper was for it to be a success story about the Holden paper assignment. The "ecstasy" for me has been in discovering that my Advanced Composition students could reach new understanding about their voices—and about themselves as readers and writers--during the process of taking on another voice/persona, since I wasn't sure going into the course what they could gain from that and the other creative writing techniques I employed during the quarter. However, as is often the case with the passage of time, things are becoming more complicated. My ecstasy has been tempered by the fact that I am currently wrapping up my second English 103 class and finding that the "success" rate of some of the assignments is not as high this time. This quarter, I am working with a much more racially diverse group of students, for many of whom the Holden assignment did not work as well, and I wonder if it is the *diversity* that is making the difference this time. In Motives, Seitz identifies an ideological disadvantage of role play as the fact that it teaches students "to imagine that they can 'become' anyone at all—regardless of race, gender, class, age, experience—simply by writing *as if* that person were themselves" (9-10). This depoliticization of the act of writing potentially ignores not only the cultural and political complexities of the persona and the text it is derived from, but also the heterogeneity of the student writers in the class.

As I look back at last Winter's class, I am encouraged by the fact that racial, gender, and age differences from Holden's white male adolescence did not seem to be an issue. Ronald was a young, white male college student, which made him more like, than

unlike, the persona. But Amy, a young white woman, Suzanne, a young Vietnamese woman, and Barbara, a middle-aged white woman, took the voice on with the same enthusiasm and confidence that Ronald did. This quarter, in contrast, my sole African American student, three of my white women students, and two of my male Latino students struggled with the assignment. In class, the women said that they found Holden's adolescent chauvinism off-putting; and though the Latino and African American students never said so, I wonder if his discernible racism and open homophobia may have discouraged them. I do know that they struggled with Holden's 1940's teenage discourse, as well as their own issues with grammar and mechanics. For an assignment like the one for the Holden paper, in which, as Amy phrased it, "Grammar rules and sentence structure are thrown out the door," the students have to know how to apply those rules before they can disrupt them. Students who don't have those skills already in place can get left behind in a "non-traditional" writing class like my version of Advanced Composition.

For the sake of the future Ronald's, Suzanne's, Amy's, and Barbara's, I don't want to say that I'll never again use a creative writing approach to teaching Advanced Composition. However, I also don't want some students to feel shut out because of their inability to relate to, and subsequently reproduce, the cultures depicted in the texts we read together. When the composition class is diverse, is the answer to stick to traditional writing instruction? I don't think so. Or should the non-traditional assignments include, in Seitz's words, "an interrogation of the ethical and cultural issues at stake" (Seitz, Motives, 166)--which would be, in my own terms, a marriage of creative writing techniques and critical inquiry? Maybe. How should grammar and mechanics issues be

worked into a non-traditional writing course, for those students who need them? I'm not sure. There are many questions that I need to answer before I teach English 103 again, and because there is so much for students to gain from role play and other stylistics writing assignments, they are worth consideration.

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